

Ectoplasm Girls

IXN

IDEAL LP

Morbid obsession with death and the hereafter has a long tradition in Western art – from the brutal ecstasies of Christian iconography, to the death-fixated poetry of John Donne, Emily Dickinson and Philip Larkin. Consider, too, HP Lovecraft's 1924 short story *The Loved Dead* (ghostwritten for Harry Houdini's booking agent, Clifford Martin Eddy), in which the maudlin, necrophiliac narrator helps define graveyard-haunting Goth sensibilities several decades before the fact. It seems sensitive souls have always been fascinated by whatever awaits. It is less common, however, to find artists attempting to use their craft to break through the veil and access the spirit world ahead of schedule.

In her audio-visual work, Stockholm based artist Nadine Byrne displays an ongoing obsession with the séance. Her 2008 installation, *Kate And Margaret* (named after 19th century mediums Kate and Margaret Fox), featured grainy, grey footage of the faces of two young sisters, framed as though in oval locket, gradually merging into a third face resembling their deceased mother. This act of spirit evocation was carried out to the sound of throbbing drones and chattering voices hovering just out of earshot. Ectoplasm Girls (named after the gauzy substance said to be excreted by mediums in contact with the dead) is a similar project, begun in 2007, in which Byrne and her older sister Tanya attempt an artistic response to losing their mother at an early age. As Byrne tells it, the sisters began conducting intimate sound experiments together, using dictaphones and cassettes, as part of the grieving process. Ectoplasm Girls is a continuation of that therapeutic urge: "In the project we express our joint experiences with death and dreams," says Byrne. On their debut album, it seems that they are doing more than simply examining death from a distance. It's as if they themselves are trying to cross over to the other side. The

album's title – especially as rendered on the sleeve with X the dominant letter – signifies Tanya and Nadine crossed out, eradicated. Through sinister, babyish vocals on tracks like "Before It Gets Too Late To Begin", the sisters are channelling the spirits of their own regressed childhood selves, communicating with parts of themselves that died of the psychic wounds inflicted by their grief.

In this attempt to recall a lost/imagined childhood, it's easy to detect superficial echoes of Hypnagogic pop. But there's little trace here of H-pop's sumptuous mid-1980s dream-hazes. Instead, there's a rougher, starker feel. Nadine Byrne was born in 1985, so, in summoning early childhood listening experiences, it's unsurprising to find her evoking late 80s/early 90s dance music. "It's True" feels like a skeletal version of Future Sound Of London's "Papua New Guinea"; "This Is" summons the stripped down early breakbeat of Meat Beat Manifesto; and "If Your Mother Asks" approximates the hard thump of early Trance. All of these are heard not through sleepy bedroom walls, but muffled through a grey curtain of ectoplasmic despair. The music is achieved using extremely simple means – basic synth loops, vocals and tapes – which have barely evolved since the sisters' early experiments in sound making (yet more evidence of young lives suspended by grief) and which operate within a haunting minimalism. "I Is The Heart" achieves a creeping menace with just a three-note synth riff, Darth Vader exhalations and disembodied calls like the little girl trapped in the TV set in Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist*.

There is an implied naiveté in the childish voices, minimal palette and barely-there DIY arrangements – but there's actually a lot more design behind the compositions than is first apparent. Tunes like "Mama Put Me In A Pie" display a deconstructed pop sensibility. With 'little girl lost' vocals and ill-fitting loops grinding against each other like cogs in a rickety machine, it's as oddly catchy as the music to an early

video game reinterpreted for the pop charts by a pre-teen *X Factor* hopeful. Yet this catchiness sits alongside, and is presented in the context of, a lo-fi Noise aesthetic – made more apparent on tracks like "Continuous Manifestations" (sic), a raw siren-blare loop infested with demonic twitterings. It would be tempting to place these contrasting approaches within the overarching theme of the project, envisioning them as different regions of a tortured and confusing spirit realm – but it doesn't all fit quite so neatly. The lip-licking lasciviousness of "Sexodrome" sticks out as a something of an anomaly, like an outtake from cult 80s sci-fi porn flick *Cafe Flesh*, momentarily breaking the spell of otherworldly childhood haunting.

Yet, if it puts the project's identity in doubt, even this can be seen as just one more layer of deliberate obfuscation and deflection. Throughout, voices are disguised, identities hidden. The sleeve art shows the sisters posing in dark, hooded cloaks, heads bowed, faces obscured. Could this be an acknowledgment – or a denial – of the spectre of Witch House? Notwithstanding that microgenre's failure to cohere satisfactorily, Ectoplasm Girls could represent the most cogent delivery on its promise yet: eldritch scryers conveying messages from the dead with the aid of scuzzed-out synths and clunking beats. A poster included with the LP reveals that the sisters' capes have Ectoplasm Girls embroidered on the back in thick black letters. Of course, there are echoes here of cornball WWF wrestling personae – and the equally over the top rituals of extreme Metal acts like Sunn O))), but it's also enough to align them with Steve Ditko-era Marvel comic characters such as Doctor Strange: occult, cosmic travellers, magically traversing planes of existence.

It all adds up to a multilayered project that transmutes personal grief into an unsettling investigation into identity and a postmodern work of mythic fiction. As Emily Dickinson observed, "Art is a house that tries to be haunted." □

Macabre electronics, works of mourning, attempts to wake the dead: Daniel Spicer is spooked by Ectoplasm Girls' musical séance



Is anybody there?: Nadine & Tania Byrne aka Ectoplasm Girls